The Death and Life of the Jewish Century

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POLITICS

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The resurgence of anti-Semitism today is not a quirk of Donald Trump. As a new book shows, it has deep roots in powerful institutions.

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A Specter Haunting Europe: The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism
Paul Hanebrink
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I had just reclined in my seat to read Paul Hanebrink's new history of "the Judeo-Bolshevik myth" when a fight erupted a dozen seats ahead in first class. I couldn't make out all that was said—something about Democrats, "fucking Jews," and, of course, George Soros, the wealthy Jewish financier and philanthropist at the heart of many sinister anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. It was as if sentences from the book leapt off the page and took on human form.

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The twenty-something by the window next to me—with a mop of curly black hair (Jewish, I assumed), wearing a "No Person is Illegal" T-shirt—was both appalled and incredulous. "Who talks like that," he said with a bent smile. The man sandwiched between us responded "plenty," adding that he grew up in South Bend, Indiana. I knew what he meant: I had been the only Jew in most of my public school classes growing up in rural California.

One could say the incident served as a concise summary of the past two years. From the Tree of Life massacre to Donald Trump tweets featuring a six-pointed star over piles of cash, suddenly anti-Semitism is back in public life—marching on college campuses, ranting in first class. The responses of the two people sitting next to me exemplify conflicting responses of the left-liberal

public to this new phenomenon: anti-Semitism has always been here, and anti-Semitism is a specter from the past.

Both statements are true, but they also seem insufficient. As the postwar liberal order crumbles, we are witnessing a radical shift in the structure of anti-Semitism. Its resurgence today is not a quirk of Trump, and it is not a response to Israel's ever-more grotesque forms of apartheid, though both are entwined with these epochal changes. It is, instead, the result of one world order collapsing, and another struggling to be born.

Both the liberal and radical left have long been troubled by anti-Semitism, not least because Zionists have deftly mobilized claims of anti-Semitism to deflect criticism of Israel, like some kind of discursive Iron Dome. Yet even beyond pro-Israel hasbara, the concept of anti-Semitism remains complicated, upsetting frameworks relied on to understand race in the United States. The Women's March has only **deepened** this crisis of definitions, as has the recent controversy over Representative Ilhan Omar's **tweets**. The charge of anti-Semitism can now be applied, it seems, to white nationalists and left-wing anti-racists alike.

To liberals, anti-Semitism is something "deplorables" engage in, presumably because they have not been to college or attended a Tim Wise anti-bias training.

The defect in the liberal view of anti-Semitism is the same as the defect in the liberal view of all forms of racist and ethnic oppression: construing it as a matter of personal psychology rather than structural or institutional injustice, the likes of which can be fixed through education and legislation. On this view, anti-Semitism, like racism against African Americans or anti-queer bias, is something "deplorables" engage in, presumably because they have not been to college or attended a Tim Wise anti-bias training on the job.

The anti-racist left arrives at a similar conclusion—that anti-Semitism isn't "structural"—by a different route. Where the liberal is blind to all structural oppression, the leftist only denies that it operates against Jews. Activist Linda Sarsour argued as much at a 2017 forum on anti-Semitism co-sponsored by *Jacobin,* Jewish Voice for Peace, Haymarket Books, and Jews for Racial and Economic Justice. Unlike racism against people of color, anti-Semitism is "is not codified into law," she explained. While one might point out most

forms of structural racism in the U.S. function within a colorblind legal framework, Sarsour was getting at a kind of materialist common sense around race most leftists share (myself included). Racism has been central to the regimes of capital accumulation since the country's founding, and the law perpetuates these inequalities. As racial theorists Michael Omi and Howard Winant articulated in their groundbreaking study *Racial Formation in the United States* (1986), race is a way of constructing and mobilizing economic and political rule by referring to "different types of human bodies." Anti-Semitism, in this scheme, may be vile, unfortunate, violent, but it is not central to the national—even global—system of capitalism. For this reason, Sarsour argued, Jews should have a seat at the table among coalitions against racism, but they shouldn't hold the mic.

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Far from contradicting Sarsour, most of the scholarship on Jewish-American identity by progressive Jewish authors has underscored that a firm line can be drawn between the structural racism faced by people of color and another variety of racism faced by European-descended Jewish Americans. Most notably, Karen Brodkin's *How Jews Became White Folks* (1998) charts how European-descended Ashkenazi Jews experienced the postwar boom the way most other "white ethnics" did: with expanded economic opportunity, state and private employment, publicly funded higher education, and access to suburban home loans. Other books, such as Michael Rogin's *Blackface, White Noise* (1996) and Matt Jacobsen's *Whiteness of a Different Color* (1999), trace similar teleologies: as for other non-WASP Europeans, the inevitable assimilation into whiteness is predicated on a rejection of blackness and an embrace of suburban segregation patterns and segregated schooling. Whatever historical trauma Jews may collectively bear, this line of thinking goes, they still generally live among white people, and they are seen as just other white people by African Americans.

As useful and necessary as this work is, it has limitations, and Hanebrink helps to give a fuller picture. Much of the work of critical race theory that informs this scholarship, as well as contemporary anti-racist practice, emerged in the years following World War II—a time when anti-Semitism was at an historic low. To many on the left, it appeared that the new liberal order was the inevitable future: the terminus where history would end, a presumption Francis Fukuyama finally made fully explicit in 1992. The far right, though still violent, was politically marginalized. Most leftist analysis was directed against the postwar liberal order, articulating critiques of a

society that embraced a colorblind logic of power. Whether Malcolm X's *Autobiography* (1965) or Stokely Carmichael's analysis of "institutional racism," much of this work rested on the assumption that racism needed deconstruction, since after the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts it had taken on more insidious forms than overt segregation and Ku Klux Klan lynchings.

This situation put Jews on the left in a bind, as discussions of anti-Semitism appeared to minimize the racist economic and political structure of U.S. capitalism. One could be a Bernardine Dohrn, thrown wholesale into the struggle against imperialism, or a Philip Roth, ironizing how deeply American Jews had assimilated into mainstream society, if only too well. It would be very easy from that vantage point to say that anti-Semitism was a problem of an earlier generation. (My incredulous Jewish seatmate seemed an emblem of this type.)

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The eruption of anti-Semitism into public life today troubles this neat and orderly narrative of Jewish progress in the United States. But it is not only the present that poses a problem for this argument. A major flashpoint of anti-Semitism arose at the very time when Jews were rapidly assimilating into white, middle-class American life—the Red Scare of the 1950s. From the late 1940s to the mid-1950s, over half of Americans associated Jews with communist espionage. Six members of the Hollywood Ten were Jewish. Two-thirds of those questioned in the 1952 McCarthy hearings were Jewish, despite Jews accounting for under 2 percent of the American population. Congressman John Rankin delighted in "unmasking" the Jewish names of Hollywood actors and directors while under HUAC investigation, and of course, the only two people ever executed on federal espionage charges during the Cold War, the Rosenbergs, were Jewish. Major liberal Jewish organizations such as the American Jewish Committee (AJC) and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) were quick to distance themselves from Jewish Americans accused of being communists. My own grandparents, Jewish members of the Communist Party, referred to the Red Scare as an American pogrom.

My point is not that anti-Semitism is a transcendent force in U.S. history, free from historical fact or context; quite the opposite. Yet this history does complicate the structural/non-structural binary laid out by the anti-racist left. If Jews are simply other white people, we might imagine anti-Semitism would

have gone the way of anti-Polish and anti-Italian racism—still alive in corners, but no longer a political force.

How, then, are we to understand a term that on the right has come to mean any criticism of the state of Israel, and on the left complicated by Ashkenazi Jewish whiteness? And perhaps more importantly, how do we understand its reemergence into public life, from the European far right to Trump?

Anti-Semitism can be hard to talk about in part because, as April Rosenblum writes in her influential pamphlet "The Past Didn't Go Anywhere," it doesn't look like other forms of racial and religious prejudice. After all, anti-Semitism often expresses itself in charges not of inferiority, but of superiority: Jews are portrayed as clever and powerful. As Hanebrink shows, far-right movements share a theory of Jewish power that crystallized in the twentieth century as "Judeo-Bolshevism"—the theory that twentieth-century communism was simply the latest iteration of "Jewish power," deployed to undermine the Christian West. Unlike other racial ideologies that focus on the seizure of bodies and the maintenance of a hierarchy based on physical appearance, anti-Semitism is a theory of society, how it is constructed and for what ends.

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Indeed, anti-Semitism may not even need actual Jews to function, as we are learning from the **rebirth of radical right in Poland**—a land so thoroughly ethnically cleansed, old Jewish gravestones **have been used to pave streets**. When right-wing protesters **demanded** Polish Prime Minister Andrzej Duda take off his yarmulke, they did not think he is actually Jewish. When the alt-right marched on the University of Virginia campus last year to chants of "Jews will not replace us," they are not worried about Jewish birthrates or Jewish immigrants "stealing" jobs.

For the right, Jews are understood as a uniquely political threat. One does not clutch one's handbag as Jews pass on the streets. Neither numerical nor physically strong enough to conquer the world by force, "Jewish power" relies on a belief in a transnational, messianic culture that unleashed the destructive forces of modernity: urbanization, alienation, pluralism, women's liberation, and the worst of all modern ills, socialism. Thus the Soviet Union did not appear to the far-right governments from Spain to Hungary to Germany as

merely an ideological enemy, but a state in which the Judeo-Bolsheviks took power and could bend the inferior Slavic masses to their will. As Hanebrink writes, Nazi conceptions of "Bolshevik Russia" were of "a Jewish-ruled Asiatic realm" that must be destroyed "for Germans to expand and thrive."

To trace the origins of "Judeo-Bolshevism" one must look to its roots in Christian supremacy. "In many ways," Hanebrink writes, "the figure of the Jewish Bolshevik is a modern day version of medieval fables about Jewish devils." He notes that the idea of a Christianity threatened by Jewish subversion can trace its way back to the Gospels. During the Spanish Civil War, fascist generals and their Catholic allies framed the conflict as a continuation of the *reconquista*, the military expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain. To the north, Poland's Catholic bishops penned a collective letter at the dawn of the Bolshevik revolution warning that the "antichrist" had arrived on earth. The racial coordinates of that trope were made clear by a **Polish anti-communist poster**: Leon Trotsky, the Jewish leader of the Red Army, appears as a naked devil atop a pile of skulls, while Asiatic Red Army troops club a body lying beneath them. In the size of Trotsky's body and his devilish appearance we are meant to see the Satanic Jew leading the Asian army to do his bidding. As Hanebrink articulates, the far-right anti-Semitism of World War II imagined itself as an "anti-Communist crusade," a missionary project of ridding Western civilization of "Jewish Bolshevik" power.

The history of anti-Semitism complicates the structural/non-structural binary laid out by the anti-racist left.

Contemporary far-right movements in the United States, whether white nationalist or Christian supremacist, reformulate the language of Jewish power for their distinctive cultural context. Perhaps the most influential single text for white nationalists is the 1978 *Turner Diaries*, published under the pseudonym Andrew Macdonald—a book Timothy McVeigh carried during his arrest after the Oklahoma City bombing. A dystopian fictional account of an uprising by white terrorist cells as they battle African American government agents, the novel features a sinister network of Jewish intelligence agencies and financiers that run the world from the shadows. Earl Turner, the leader of the white nationalist "Organization," triumphs, and North America is ethnically cleansed. All white women who marry black or Jewish men are publicly hanged; the Soviet Union, New York City, and Tel Aviv are left in radioactive ash.

This portrait of the world, in which Jews are the masterminds of an ostensibly African American political "System," is little different from the European far-right conception of the Soviet Union as an "Asiatic" land dominated by Jewish power. Greg Johnson, far-right journalist and editor of *Counter Currents,* summed up the meaning of Jewish power in a 2014 **editorial**, citing "the organized Jewish community" as "the *principal* enemy—not the sole enemy, but the principal enemy." For a large part of the contemporary U.S. right, "The Jew" is the most fundamental explanation of modern liberal democracy—its racial base, you could say, or what the circulation of value would be for a Marxist.

The language of modern Jewish power has long found its way into mainstream right-wing politics. Whether Ted Cruz decrying **"New York values**," or Fox News claiming **"anti-Christian bias"** in Hollywood (often by notably Jewish directors), a soft, dog-whistle anti-Semitism circulates easily. But in the last few years there has been a dramatic rise in both anti-Semitic statements and anti-Semitic hate crimes reported to police, **rising at twice the rate of hate crimes against other racialized groups**. The trope of the liberal cosmopolitan in New York and Hollywood has been refashioned into—in fact, as Hanebrink shows, rediscovered as—a sinister figure controlling vast armies of surrogate colonial subjects in a plot to topple the West.

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George Soros is only the most visible target of this resurgent Judeo-Bolshevism. Both Glenn Beck, believing that Soros is behind the Obama presidency, and Trump, promoting the theory that Soros funded the migrant caravan, have a form of the Judeo-Bolshevik as their common target: a malevolent, invisible force subverting the nation from within, by mobilizing enemies from without. This is also the logic of Robert Browers; hours before slaughtering eleven people in the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, he who wrote that the Jewish American nonprofit HIAS, which provides humanitarian aid to refugees, "likes to bring in invaders that kill our people." That Soros is both a wealthy capitalist *and* an advocate of liberal democracy makes sense only if both are seen as alien, destructive forces of modernity, undoing a "natural" and organic white racial community.

The question is, why now? Hanebrink provides intriguing clues, noting that after World War II, Jews in the United States were offered "communal

membership" in liberal, mainstream society—so long as they renounced Communism and defined their identity along normative religious lines. A group of postwar German theologians theorized this new inclusion by replacing the "Judeo-Bolshevik" threat with "Judeo-Christian" society, enlisting liberal Jews in their fight against atheistic, Asiatic Communism. By framing both Nazism and Communism as threats to the liberal, Christian order of the West, Jews in the United States often became willing conscripts in the democratic fight against third-world revolution and Communist conspiracy. Embracing the Judeo-Christian ideal, the liberal AJC and ADL joined the anti-Communist witch-hunts of the McCarthy era by refusing to defend Jewish communists, and even advocating for the execution of the Rosenbergs. For the first time, liberal Jewish intellectuals, from Daniel Ellsberg to Lionel Trilling, saw the U.S. state as the guarantor of Jewish wellbeing, provided "anti-Communism" was embraced as "a criterion of Jewish communal membership." Ethnic studies scholars such as myself might refer to this new sense of liberal, democratic belonging as "whiteness."

While Hanebrink does not address the question of Zionism other than to note that most left-wing, secular Jews opposed it prior to World War II, Israel has played a major role in normalizing Jewish identity among Western governments and elites. Israel not only territorialized the transnational, diasporic Jewish subject; it has also joined "the West" in combatting its own series of racialized, systematic threats—socialist pan-Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s, and now the "Islamic" threat represented by Hezbollah, Iran, and Hamas. As the "only democracy in the Middle East" (a characterization wielded by many U.S. politicians), Israel was represented as a liberal, Western outpost among the Oriental barbarians of Nasser's armies and Iran's Shia clerics. If "Judeo-Christian civilization was a central feature of Cold War liberal rhetoric," as Hanebrink argues, then Israel, both as the entrance of Jews into the order of Westphalian statehood and the Cold War battlefields from Lebanon to Nicaragua, also marked the entrance of Jews into liberal, global order constructed by U.S. imperial planners at the close of World War II—a global analogy to Jewish assimilation in the United States.

While U.S. military and diplomatic support for Israel may be peripheral to the global rise of the right, it is nonetheless clear that the postwar liberal imperial order of both Bretton Woods and NATO—in which Israel became a key link—is under severe strain. Israel is increasingly seen less as the Middle East's lone democracy than as **the last apartheid state**, with a **grafing, corrupt elite of its own**. Closer to home, the postwar liberal order, with its ideology of colorblind democracy and equal opportunity for all, is not so much under threat as collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions. The profit

squeeze of the 1970s meant that capitalism could no longer afford both an ample welfare state and an expanding share of the profits for the ruling elite, so it ditched the former while doubling down on the latter.

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The rise of Trump, as with the rise of illiberal governments from Hungary to Russia to India, should be understood as a response to the crisis of liberalism. And with the end of the postwar welfare state, so too are we seeing the end of liberal order in which Jews, so briefly it may have seemed, found an unmarked home, one in which their identity was understood not only as normative but foundational to the global system: what Yuri Slezkine referred to as "the Jewish Century." When **Trump calls the departing Jewish economic advisor, Gary Cohn, a "globalist**," a term he has used several times to mock critics of economic nationalism, he is not only Jew-baiting; he is signifying the end of the "Judeo-Christian" order in which someone like Cohn may be seen as a representative. It is not a coincidence that the most **anti-Semitic members of Trump's cabinet** are also the most critical of globalized capitalism. Steve Bannon, who was the architect of Trump's electoral campaign, not only cited **"free trade and immigration"** as Trump's winning issues but **ran hit pieces from his editorial post at Breitbart complaining of "renegade Jews,"** to say nothing of the journal's obsession with Soros.

Does all this mean that anti-Semitism is structural? Not quite, if by "structural" we mean codified into law, or materially necessary for the reproduction of capitalism. On this point, it is useful to draw a distinction between *structural* and *institutional* forms of oppression. Ashkenazi Jews in the United States are, by and large, educated and middle-class, and most European-descended Jews experience the United States as white people, with all the racial privilege—and racism—that go along with it. They do not suffer from mass incarceration and residential segregation. Nevertheless anti-Semitism is institutional: in many powerful U.S. institutions, from the evangelical church to the Republican Party (to say nothing of a more radical far right), anti-Semitic thought is a regular staple of analysis. Anti-Semitism is not an aberration for these groups, but part of their foundational ideology. We cannot oppose the right without also opposing—and understanding—the right-wing origins of anti-Semitic thought.

There is no ideological framework in which anti-Semitism explains or informs a socialist internationalist practice.

If there is a silver lining to viewing the "Judeo-Bolshevik myth" as an archeology of the present, it is that we can begin to disentangle much of the confusion around the term, from the scandals rocking Ilhan Omar and Jeremy Corbyn to the BDS movement and the Women's March. While individual progressives may indeed be anti-Semitic, and should be called out for anti-Semitic comments and actions, Hanebrink reminds us that there is no ideological framework in which anti-Semitism explains or informs a socialist internationalist practice. Unlike Palestine solidarity activists, or African American feminists, the Christian and secular right do pose real threats to ongoing Jewish thriving in the United States, do exercise real power, and do commit regular acts of violence. Unless the political and economic conditions of global capitalism are challenged by a multi-ethnic, transnational left, the mainstream Jewish establishment may look to an increasingly far-right Israel for protection, even as its apartheid state allies with fascists from Brazil to Ukraine to secure its crumbling world image.

This path is disaster, both for Jews and the left.